Tragicomic Vision in Anton Chekhov's Three Sisters

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Abstract

The tragicomic vision is one of the interests of Anton Chekhov, the Russian dramatist who longs to portray and present it authentically and honestly in his play the *Three Sisters*. It is the realistic vision of life which includes in it the tragic and comic sides of man's life, especially modern man's life. Being a realist, Chekhov is one of those dramatists who perceive life as a mixture of tragedy and comedy. This realization represents the realistic vision of life. For such an end, he wrote plays of mixed moods in which he combines two genres of tragedy and comedy. This form of dramatic writing is called tragicomedy that Chekhov adopts in his play. Believing that the comic and ridiculous can become an effective means of expressing the serious, in other words the tragic. For that, he includes in his play tragicomic scenes that include comic characters and situations as an effective technique for such purpose. The paper aims to deal with that.

In the modern time, it is difficult to distinguish between the tragic and the comic. So that, Chekhov reflects those tragic and comic aspects of the human conditions by bringing together, the tragic and the comic in a mixed form. According to Chekhov, man finds himself among meaningless, trivial and empty world, so he has no other choice only to face and survive by laughter and comic response to his tragic life. In this sense, he shares the contemporary absurdist dramatists like Samuel Beckett, in their concern with the meaninglessness that lies at the heart of existence. In *Three Sisters*, Chekhov shows people laughing at their miseries and life's contradictions. So, The laughter became an effective way to express the serious and the painful simultaneously.

Tragicomedy: Emergence and Definition

-Emergence of Tragicomedy:

Throughout the history of drama, there used to be a clear distinction between tragedies and comedies, that the tragedies end painfully while comedies end happily. But nowadays many plays are written by modern writers can not be described or named as tragedies or comedies, they are both. There is a mixing of the elements of tragedy and those of comedy. Such new mixed form is called tragicomedy

There are many factors and conditions that helped tragicomedy to be found and emerged as one of many forms of drama. Beside tragedy, comedy, melodrama, and farce, tragicomedy was established as one of the literary forms of drama.

One of these factors is the change of values in a society. Certainly, there is an agreement that the significance and acceptance of the traditional forms of drama in a society depend on the standard of values and norms in that society. Whenever a shift in values happens in the society, there is a possibility that the distinctions between the forms of drama breakdown or become confused. because these values and norms decide what is serious and what is ridiculous. But after the shatter of such public agreement on what is funny and what is serious, there became an equality, in other words no difference between them. In return a confusion was brought up to all life's experiences. This is exactly what caused the emergence of tragicomedy as a new form of drama. It can be generalized:

> As beliefs and values crumbled and changed, the clear-cut distinctions between the established forms of drama became fuzzy. This was particularly true of the forms of tragedy and comedy. When you can't be sure what actions really mean, and when the relationship between actions and results is unclear, the serious tends to be inseparable from the ludicrous.[1]

Drama as a form of writing reflects the shifts and the changes of life in an age. Like the political changes that followed the change or the death of the ruler or a change of a government or a regime, certainly will bring with it a crumble of the values and believes of the society in general. Consequently, such a blur and confusion will be portrayed and reflected on theater. By such a blur, it became difficult to name plays as tragedy and comedy. There became an erase of the traditional distinction

between the serious, painful, comic, ridiculous, the rational and irrational. In modern and ordinary experience of life, the tragic and comic are not distinguished. A closer observation of such experience will often reveal tragedy while a superficial study will reveal a comedy. In this way, there became a blur between the tragedy and comedy.

The process of internalization that began in theater also helped the tragicomedy to appear and flourish in modern theater. In modern time it became difficult to decide or describe how the world is now? There is a rejection of a direct relationship between our external actions, inner motivations and feelings. The development of psychology as a field of study encouraged and helped this process of internalization. As psychology claims clear that "the distinction between rational and irrational behavior is not clear-cut and that labeling any behavior as abnormal or inappropriate is a tremendously complicated task."[2]

There became a difference between appearance and reality as the actions and behaviors for the modern dramatist do not necessary mean what they seem to mean. Consequently, this difference enhanced the appearance of tragicomedy. The same mixing that happened between appearance and reality caused a mixing between tragic and comic elements. Innately man has an ideal of conduct that he pursuits to reach but sometimes circumstances and man's limitation as man thwart him from reaching the ideal. So that, this longing for the best can seem noble, or foolish, or both of them that is called tragicomic. This is the realistic vision of man's life that combines the tragic and comic at the same time. For this consideration, tragicomedy became a literary form that well portrays man's reality.

In the ordinary experience, the tragic and comic elements of life are not distinguished and the division into heroes and villains is inapplicable to our knowledge of human nature. Otherwise life will be more easier if such distinctions exist. Even the psychologists came into conclusion that scientifically, mankind can not be divided into sheep and goats.[3]

The meaning of tragic and comic at the time of Greece and the Elizabethan England differed from its modern meaning. Now after many social changes that happened by the industrial revolution, the theories of Darwin's evolution and that of Karl Marx concerning the economic forces and its effect upon the modern man, the meaning of tragic differed completely. The tragic meaning in the twentieth century means a despair and uncertainty not only of existence but also of the identity.[4] In this

sense, there is a similarity between the dramatists of tragicomedy and the absurdists. They agree on the meaninglessness and emptiness of man's life and both of them choose tragicomedy as a form of expression that is more realistic and authentic. The tragicomic dramatists differ in being more optimistic than the absurdists who believe in the impossibility of man to change, whereas the tragicomic like Chekhov believes in man's ability to change and add a meaning to this meaningless world. The comic sense is differed as well in that the laughter became an effective way to express the serious, that laughter is now combined by pity. Thus the new comic vision became darker and heavier than the tragic vision itself. Both the tragic and the comic senses are combined to reflect the modern vision of humanity that can be described as more authentic and more realistic.

In this way the tragicomedy emerges as a form that well represents man's reality. It is a genre of writing that became spread and a landmark that distinguished most of the modern playwrights and Chekhov is one of them.

- Definition of Tragicomedy:

Actually, the meaning of tragicomedy varied and developed throughout the history of drama. The word was first coined by the Roman dramatist Plautus in the 2nd B.C, when he spoke about tragicomedies in his play *Amphitryon*, a Roman comedy. As its name implies, tragicomedy is a mixed dramatic form that incorporating both tragic and comic elements.

Later on the term tragicomedy developed in the Renaissance that it became "a genre of play that mixed tragic elements into drama that was mainly comic."[6] Reversal, love, disguises, surprises, jealousy and a happy ending were central to this kind of tragicomedy. Also the term in English dramatic history is usually applied to a particular kind of plays that were developed by Beaumont and Fletcher. Fletcher provides a good example of such genre in the *Faithful Shepherdess*. In this sense Shakespeare's the *Merchant of Venice* and the *Winter's Tale* are notable examples of tragicomedy. In *Merchant of Venice* the trick about the shedding of blood was omitted allowing Shylock to have his bond and play will be considered easily a tragedy.[7] Many Romantic writers in the nineteenth century, follow Shakespeare's use of tragicomedy believing that his plays mirror nature so that they used him as a model for their works.

In the seventeenth century it was defined as "a mixture of tragedy, which went from good fortune to bad, and comedy, which reversed the order from bad fortune to good."[5] In addition of combining the tragic and comic situations, it also mixes characters from all stations of life. It was distinguished by its ending, in that tragicomedies were serious and tragic plays but with happy ending or avoided catastrophes. The tone, language, action and subject matter are serious which means having most of the tragic elements but never carrying the tragic conclusion but includes comic elements as low-born characters, laughter and jests as the Italian writer Basttista Guarini defined.[8]

In modern time, the term tragicomedy is used to describe "plays with mixed moods in which the endings are neither exclusively tragic nor comic, happy nor unhappy." [9] This can be applied on most of Chekhov's plays. Being a realist who shows life as it is, he has a detached observant eye who looks and observes the ills of society but without offering suggestions. This is why most of his plays end neither happily nor tragically, they content the two visions that represent the tragicomic vision of life. He almost presents questions but he doesn't presume any answers to his posed questions. For instance his play the *Three Sisters*. The play ended without any clear destination for the three sisters. They are drifted away of their ancestors house with their intention to go on in their life though all the misfortunes they face. Where they shall go! It is unknown. Chekhov himself seems to offer such questions but with no answers as he believes that "life is an insoluble problem".[10]

In the modern form of tragicomedy, the dramatists show on the stage people's anxieties and contradictions but make them laugh on them. So that, modern tragicomedy is associated with Absurdist drama, it suggests that "Laughter is the only response left to man when he is faced with the tragic emptiness and meaninglessness of existence.[11] Chekhov as one of the dramatists who wrote tragicomedies, shares the contemporary absurdists in their interest in human anguish and suffering and their concern with voidness, which is a feature of the modern existence. Although the absurdists are more pessimistic than the tragicomic dramatists but both of them mirror the realistic vision of life. As Beckett portrays the world of pozzo saying that "The tears of the world are constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops. The same true of the laugh."[12]

So that the Renaissance and the modern tragicomedy mix the tragic and the comic in order to evoke such mixed responses in the audience. It combines the tragic sense of pity and fear of Aristotle that is horror and

despair in the modern sense and the comic sense which is laughter. Thus, the humor and laugh of the tragicomic characters are mixed with anguish and despair.[13]

The Tragicomic Vision in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*

Anton Chekhov seems to speak poignantly to our current time, he is like many modern dramatists who describe the dominant modern vision in their plays. He is like Ibsen, Pirandello, Brecht, Beckett, Ionisco, Pinter, Albee and O'Neill. All of them agree that "the trivial and funny can become the most effective way of communicating the serious and painful."[14]

In the modern theatre, the comic became indistinguishable and inseparable from the tragic, this is the world of tragicomedy that Chekhov tries to show in his play the *Three Sisters*. It is drama of dispossession and failed hopes. In this play**,** Chekhov attempts to depict the gap between human possibility and actuality between desire and achievement. By this gap, the three sisters are torn. They are suffering from this discrepancy between their desires and the bad conditions of their circumstances that block their longings but they face it with laugh on their anguish. They have no other choice just to continue hoping that one day the future will bring happiness for them. Chekhov had an understanding of the role of humor plays as a means of endurance through the challenging world.[15]

In the ***Three Sisters***, Chekhov presents and portrays the lives of a desperate and ordinary people in rural Russia around the turn of the nineteenth century such as provincial gentry, professors, doctors, teachers and garrisoned military. The only thing that unite them is their survival in front of the irreconcilable forces that reduce them into suffering. There is a recurrent theme that appears in most of Chekhov's works that is a valuable resistance and survival against the social and economic changes that happened clearly in the modern age which have an influence on man's life and psyche. Comic situations and characters veil inside a desperation and a tragic sense, which are translated by a ridiculous laughter on the stage. Hope is a sign of endurance that prevails the play and keeps them alive though all the misfortunes. As Masha, the middle sisters, proclaims at the end of the play that "we must go on living…" (iv,p.329), in her words a happy and a comic flavor are combined that although of their miseries and their dismiss from Natasha, the wife of Andry, they ridiculously still have a hope in tomorrow.

In such powerful way, Chekhov combines the tragic and comic vision in his play. There is a juxtaposition between the two visions that finally express the realistic and authentic vision of life. The vision of life is a homogeneous of the tragic and comic sides of life. So, the play:

> Examines and celebrates the resilience of human spirit and our ability to endure the seemingly unendurable. The play reveals our need to create form and structure to preserve and find meaning in our lives. [16]

The characters of the play struggle against the power of triviality, in other words there is an inner conflict between the character and environment. Triviality is a dangerous force that corrupt and trap the lives and desires of the main characters.[17] Behind the humorous words and situations, there is a dim sea of banality that Chekhov tries to reveal in mixing the tragic and the comic in his play. He blends the humorist gentle smile with a bitter reproach. He realizes the humanity's comic and pathetic failure but he tries to awake in the audience the ability of change to add meaning to his meaningless world. There will be a gap between man's possibility and actuality that sets him in a conflict and suffering that man can't face only through laughter. He reflects those tragic and comic aspects of the human conditions by bringing together the tragic and the comic in mixed form.

To act the realistic vision of life on the stage, Chekhov includes in his play scenes that can be called tragicomic scenes. There are scenes that are tragic and other scenes that are comic, but the concern will be on the tragicomic scenes. In order to show how brilliantly Chekhov describes and portrays the realistic vision of life, he combines the tragic and comic vision of life in an artistic form on the stage. Chekhov in *Three Sisters* " is bringing comedy and tragedy together in an overtly comic (because mixed) form that is nevertheless full of the sense of the tears in things. Full of tears, but in away that is spry, understated, gracile and everyday."[18]

The Tragicomic Scenes in *Three Sisters*:

Chekhov believes that the tragic and comic vision of life can't be separated. There are scenes in the play that can be described as comic but actually they denote a bitter tragic meaning. This is the combination of life that Chekhov wants to show. To direct the attention of people towards their bitter realities, he presents them in comic and humorous way.

The tragicomic vision is reflected in the play throughout the tragicomic scenes. In modern theater, the mask of the comic becomes indistinguishable from the tragic one. This is the realm of tragicomedy.[19]

Chekhov includes in his play many tragicomic scenes which are charged by multi meanings. The first tragicomic scene is in Act I, concerning Chebutykin, an army doctor. He is a close friend for the Prtopove's family, the family of the three sisters. Their mother was the only woman he ever loved as he tells Irina, the youngest sister, why he didn't get married till now "because I was madly in love with your mother and she was married …"[2o] (ii,P.289). He is an old doctor whose medical knowledge as a doctor is reduced. He didn't read a book for along time, since he was a student in the University. Throughout the play, he is only reading newspaper which Chekhov uses as a symbol of his grass ignorance. He always puts a newspaper in his pocket. He didn't do any work and he refuses to work even in future as he confesses by his own words "It's quite true that I never have done any work. Not a stroke since I left the university. I haven't even read a book, only newspapers. [*Takes another newspaper out of his pocket.*]. For instance, here, I know from the paper that there was a person called Dobrolliubov, but what he wrote about I've not the faintest idea…God alone knows…"(i ,P.254).

The tragicomic scene is when Chebutykin takes and writes down a prescription from newspaper about the prevention of the fall of hair. As Chekhov describes him, "Chebutykin:[*reads the paper as he comes in*]. Here's a recipe for falling hair…two ounces of naphthaline, half-a-bottle of methylated spirit…dissolve and apply once a day… [*Writes it down in a notebook*.] Well, as I was trying to explain to you, you cork the bottle and pass a glass tube through the cork. Then you take a pinch of powdered alum, and…"(i,p.252)

Really, it is superficially a comic and funny scene but it is full of tragic sense. It is an indication that Chebutykin is not only cut from

medical knowledge and progress but he is taking a prescription from the newspaper. It is a silly, comic and laughing situation. Since he is a doctor, he supposed to be a knowledgeable, intelligent and has a wide medical information who gives the patient a prescription. But instead, he takes the prescriptions from a public newspaper. Ironically, his first words clearly indicate that this old doctor's medical knowledge has been reduced and his mind became empty that he takes an absurd and silly prescriptions from a newspaper.[21]

Superficially, it is a comic scene but there is in its depth a tragic meaning. Chekhov charges this comic scene with a symbolic meaning that is full of a bitter reproach. A reproach for those men whose soul and mind became empty, who don't know how to respect their human dignity. Chebutykin submits without any resistance to the stagnation of the province where he lives in. Instead of curing people of their diseases, he became infected by a dangerous disease that is banality and triviality that many people suffer from. He became a detached character who is immersed in the triviality of his surrounding. The tragedy of man lies in his failure to add this meaning by work and education.

By Chebutykin's character, Chekhov wants to show that behind the comic and funny situations, there is a sorrow of men who submit easily to the banality of their lives. He wants to show men their terrible and shameful picture of their lives. In ridiculing the doctor, he reproaches in this comic way people who don't use work and education in defeating failure and banality. Chekhov believes in the ability of man to change his life by work and education otherwise failure will be his fate. He portrays how the life of this doctor is meaningless as he left aside his education and ironically took his source of prescription from the newspaper. Instead of making us only laugh, Chekhov forces us to feel pity and sorrow on such characters, and contemplate the tragedy of life's trivialities and emptiness. For him:

> His enemy was banality; he fought it all his life long; he ridiculed it, drawing it with a pointed and unimpassioned pen finding the mustiness of banality even where at the first glance everything seemed to be arranged very nicely.[22]

Another tragicomic scene concerns also Chebutykin when he gave Irina, the youngest sister a tea-urn as her birthday's gift. It is a present that is given as a silver –wedding present in middle class families, it is

unsuitable for a birthday. He loves Irina too much because she reminds him of her mother. He wants to bring an expensive gift but he doesn't know that his gift is unsuitable for a young girl of twenty in her birthday. It caused a gasp of horror. [*Enter Chebutykin, followed by a solider carrying a silver samovar. Murmurs of astonishment and displeasure*] (i,p.256) The amazement and horror of the gift are clear from the reaction of Olga, the oldest sister: "Olga [*covering her face with her hands*]. A samovar! But this is dreadful! [*goes through to the ballroom and stands by the table*.] Whereas Masha reacts "Ivan Romanych, you truly ought to be ashamed of yourself!"(i,p.256)

This tragicomic scene tells a lot about Chebutykin. He is doing nothing, only reading his newspaper. This isolated him from the world around him and gave him no importance at all. He confesses and realizes this reality saying that: "My dear sweet girls, I've no one in the world but you. You're dearer to me than anything in the world! I'm nearly sixty, I'm an old man, a lonely utterly unimportant old man. The only thing that's worth anything in me is my love for you and if it weren't for you, really I would have been dead along ago." (i,p.256)

Such scene of the gift as David Magasshack refers "could have occurred only to a man who had lost all touch with life".[23] When he lost his love, the mother of the three sisters after she got married, he didn't love another woman. He became a detached from the people without love and family. He became old and destroyed. He was isolated from life as he lost the symbol of life, his beloved. He wants to bring an expensive gift to express his love, but he couldn't think only in this gift, a silver samovar.

It is a comic scene but by contemplating its deep meaning, it reveals a tragic sense vision. It is a meaningful situation that expresses and denotes a tragic and bitter reality concerning the old doctor's life. Chekhov wants to refer to the main characteristics and features of the old doctor, that he is completely divorced from life and alienated from life and the people around him. Chekhov wants him to be a symbol for such men who are failure in the world. He wants to criticize such kind of people through this character in its comic but at the same time tragic situation.

Another side of Chebutykin's divorce from life is his carelessness towards his patients. Being a doctor, he is supposed to be a passionate merciful character, and full of humanity and compassion. But ironically he is merciless towards his patients. It is an expression of a tragic vision

of humanity, when man doesn't sense the meaning of his existence and its importance he will lose his humanity. As if he wants to say that when man loses his humanity, existence and identity he is no more a human being. He will be lifeless and empty from inside. He once was a human being when he loved a woman a selfless love but when he lost this love his first step of his degradation and dehumanization has begun.[24]

After losing his love, his life no longer exists for him. For him it is only a delusion and fancy. He lost the sense of life and humanity. In his soliloquy in act iii, he says "Perhaps I'm not a man at all, but merely imagine that I have got hands and feet and ahead. Perhaps I don't exist at all, and I only imagine that I'm walking about and eating and sleeping. (*weeps*) Oh, if only I could simply stop existing![*Stops crying, glumly*]." (iii,p.298) These words are very impressive, miserable and pessimistic words. He feels that he is not a human being and he doesn't exist at all, because he is unimportant and valueless. This sense agonizes him too much as he became no more a human being, in this way Chekhov stripped him from his main characteristics of man.

Chebutykin expresses his complete degradation when he says that he is "I'm not a man at all" , even the officers of the army that are going to leave the province forgot to farewell and say good bye to him. It is a habit that he doesn’t care about any thing and he pronounces all the time, "nothing matter" and "nonsense".

His insistence of the indifference of everything for him is meaningful that "the insistence that nothing makes any difference suggests his complete denial of the demands of a changing world. Chebutykin is a perpetuator of the stagnant world from which the sisters are trying to escape."[25] He is a contrastive voice against the experiences of hope of the three sisters. He is an expression of the tragic vision of life that is the contrary of the comic and hopeful vision of the three sisters. Although of their miseries and misfortune, the three sisters till the last moment are believers in the future that tomorrow may be better than the present.

His indifference became clear in act iv when he was just waiting the duel between Solyny, a captain in the army, and Toozenbach, Baron and Lieutenant in the same army, the fiancé of Irina. He is sitting in a chair in the garden and just waiting the duel between them to begin. He is able to stop their fighting by telling Irina about it. He easily just says "but what does it really matter if there's one baron more or less in the world? Well, let it be! It's all the same. " (iv,p.317)

So that, throughout the character of Chebutykin, Chekhov wants to say to people who lost their sense of life, work and hope to look at their self and their life and try to improve it. He wanted to say honestly to people:

> Look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!. The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will certainly create another and better life for themselves.[26]

Another tragicomic vision in the play is the scene between Andrey, the brother of the three sisters, and the deaf Ferapont, an old porter from the country office where Andrey works. Andrey is a university teacher who longs to be a professor. Unlike his father, the solider, he chose an academic career. He dreams one day to become a successful teacher and professor as Irina tells Chebutykin "We've got quite a clever brother….We're expecting him to be a professor. Papa was a military man, but Andry chose an academic career."(i,p.261) He reads until four o'clock in the morning and practice a translation of some books but actually he doesn't achieve or do anything just dreams.

He plays a violin or a fiddle, a fret work, sitting near the candle and reading as an outlet and an indication for his failure and loneliness. He is an escapist character that his escape is translated by his playing the fiddle, his reading, and translation of books that bring nothing for him.[27] Worse than this, he got married from a rural girl who is Natasha. She is unlikable by his sisters but he got married her. She controlled him, until he became powerless to a degree that she inflicted his three sisters out of their father's house and became the mistress of the house.

Andrey is a passive and submissive character that he knows that his wife has a relationship with Protopopv, the boss of Andrey in his work but he does nothing. Thus, he accepts even taking care of Protopopv's daughter and his children together. At the end of the play, he is wholly controlled by his wife that he does what she asks him to do. The play ended and Andrey did nothing only signing the papers of the office and pushing the pram of Protopopv's daughter.

In a very pathetic tragicomic scene, he is expressing his failure to the deaf Ferapont, an old porter. Although he is deaf, but Andrey speaks with him. It is a sarcastic situation to talk with a deaf old man. It is a kind of monologue in which he expresses what is going on inside himself. He tries to pronounce his agonies and miseries and hopes. Of course, he

pronounces rhetorical questions as he is sure that such a deaf man can't answer his questions.

After Natasha, Andrey's wife blew out the light as a sign of her prevalence and control over Protrovoe's home and life. Andrey was obliged to light a candle. At this time, he began a conversation with Ferapont. Actually, it is not a conversation with a deaf man, but more correctly, it is a conversation with himself.[28] He says to Ferapont:

> Yes, my dear old fellow, how things do change, what a fraud life is! So strange! Today I picked up this book ,just out of boredom, because I hadn't anything to do. It's a copy of some lectures I attended at the university….Good Heavens! Just think-I'm secretary of the local council now, and Protopove's chairman, and the most I can ever hope is to become a of the council myself! I –member of the local Council! I who dream every night that I'm a professor in Moscow University, a famous academian, the pride of all Russia!. (ii,P.274)

Ferapont simply replies him "I'm sorry, I can't tell you, I don't hear very well."(ii,p.274) Andrey recognizes well that Ferapont can't hear him as he is a deaf man, for this reason he talks to him just to outlet his burdens. As a sign of assurance Andrey replies him that "If you could hear properly I don't think I'd be talking to you like this. I must talk to someone, but my wife doesn't seem to understand me…." (ii,p.274).

It is a comic scene but it expresses Andrey's tragic vision. The old fellow is deaf, but Andrey wants someone to talk to freely without any questions to outlet his burdens, agonies and sufferings. He feels the ache of his failure of becoming a professor, failure of being a strong brother and husband. So he finds Ferapont most suitable, he "finds it convenient to have someone to unburden his soul to, someone, that is, who would not ask awkward questions."[29]

Andrey comically and painfully realizes his tragedy very well that how low he has fallen but he can't do or change anything. He got married Natasha, who discovered later that she isn't a human being, as he says "there's something about her which pulls her down to the level of an animal…a sort of mean, blind, thick-skinned animal-anyway, not a human being..." (iv,p.318)

His talk with Ferapont is a kind of talking with himself. Again, he talks with him in act iv. Throughout these conversations which are like a monologue, he reveals his soul bare to the audience.[30] His past differed from the present and his life and dreams vanished away. He is revealing his tragedy saying:

> Oh, where has all my past life gone to? The time when I was young and clever, when I used to have fine dreams and great thoughts, and the present and the future were bright with hope? Why do we become so dull and commonplace and uninteresting almost before we've begun to live? Why do we get lazy, indifferent, useless and unhappy? (iv,p.322)

This tragicomic scene of Andrey and Feraont is a reflection of one of many faces that portray the tragicomic vision of life as it is seen by Chekhov. It is a face of that tragicomic vision of life. Masha in some words sums up the tragedy of Andrey in very expressive image after seeing Andrey wheeling the pram with his son. She says:

> "[*looking at Andrey, who again crosses the stage with the pram.*] There's Andrey, our dear brother …All our hopes are gone. It's the same as when thousands of people haul a huge bell up into a tower. Untold labour and money is spent on it, and then suddenly it falls and gets smashed. Suddenly, without rhyme or reason. It was the same with Andrey…" (iv,pp.316-317)

However bad and miserable his present life, he still hopes that one day he'll gain what he will desire and long for as he says in act iv near the end of the play "I hate the life I live at present, but oh! the sense of elation when I think of the future! Then I feel so light hearted, such a sense of release! I seem to see light a head, light and freedom. I see myself free, and my children, too,- free from idleness,…." (iv,p.323). This is the nature of man, he doesn't give up hope.

By these words, it can be said that Andrey with his sisters represent and symbolize a voice of hope represented by Moscow. For them, Moscow is the future and happiness. In contrast to that voice, there is the voice of stagnation of the provincial represented by Chybutkin, the old army doctor. This tragicomic scene emphasizes the contrast between man's dreams, strivings and the tragic reality of life. There are many hostile forces in the way of man to achieve and realize his inspiration and

dreams. Andrey with his sisters are longing for returning back to Moscow, the place where they were born and lived their childhood. They were happy there but after coming to live in the provincial, their life became boring and stagnant. For them, Moscow is associated with happiness and pleasure.

There are many tragicomic scenes that are related to the idea of the yearning of the three sisters: Olga, Masha, Irina and their brother Andrey. It is the main idea that most of the scenes of the play are centered around. Their aspiration unfortunately is halted by outside forces that contrast their inner strivings and impulses as if life in every detail seems to curb their aspiration.[31] But they don't give up hope. This represents the contrast between dreams and achievement, between tragedy and comedy. When there is fun and comedy there is pain and tragedy, they are correlative visions.

Chekhov is a realist who perceives life as a combination of these two visions. He sees that there is no border between the two because this is the actual vision of life that is called a tragicomic vision. This vision is clear in the play in the longing of the three sisters and their brother to return back to Moscow. They are torn between this conflict between desires and limitation and achievement and reality. They aspire to return back to Moscow but life's conditions prevent and block their way. This idea, Chekhov expresses by many tragicomic scenes in the play in a form of serious conversations and questions that are interrupted by something trivial and comic.

The first conversation is between Masha, the most sensitive sister, who married a dull schoolmaster, Kulygin, and Vershinin who is a Lieutenant-Colonel and Battery Commander. She fell in love with him because she found in him a spiritual and intellectual companion. He is a substitution to her dull husband. She is looking for love as a way of running from her miserable life and also longing to go to Moscow thinking that there she will be happier than living her life with the classical husband. But unfortunately she didn't get any as Vershinin left her. For her, in Moscow there will be no difference if the weather is summer or winter as she says "People who don't even notice whether it is summer or winter are lucky! I think I'd be indifferent to the weather if I were living in Moscow."(ii,p.284) But their longing doesn't necessarily mean that when they return back there, they'll be happy. On the contrary, this idea beautifully and brilliantly expressed by Vershinin. The tragicomic scene began in his conversation with Masha.

In this tragicomic scene, Vershinin tells Masha about the imprisoned French Cabinet Minister who once read about it. When the minister was in the prison and from the window of his jail he noticed for the first time the beauty of the birds. They are the same birds but he never noticed their beauty when he was free and never will notice it after he'll be released from his prison.[32] He says:

> He writes with such a passionate delight about the birds he can see through the prison window-thee birds he never noticed when he was a cabinet minister. Of course, now he's released he won't notice them anymore…And in the same way, you won't notice Moscow once you live there again. We're not happy and we can't be happy: we only want happiness. (ii,p.284)

Being a realist, Chekhov wished to show life as it is, not as it supposed to be, he expresses the reality by Vershinin's character. His words are bitter and full of misery but this is the painful reality of life. He pronounces the reality that there is a clash between man and the hostile forces of life. Man is looking for happiness but he can't attain since life's circumstances prevents him.

Chekhov presents this tragic limitation of man in a comic and ridiculous way. At this serious and pathetic moment, Toozenbach, a Baron and a lieutenant, the fiancé of Irina, interrupts their talking by picking up a box of chocolates from the table asking Irina where the chocolates have gone!. He[*Picks up a box from the table*]. I say, where all chocolates? (ii,p.284) This juxtaposition between the serious and the comic by Toozenbach's silly question about the chocolates, and the mix of the trivial with the serious in such comic ridiculous way is intentional of Chekhov. He wants to show the disparity between hopes and desires and man's limitation and triviality that obstruct man's happiness and realization. So that, the idea of disjunction between dream and reality seems to be confirmed at such tragicomic scene.[33]

In the same scene, when Vershinin presents in his conversation with Masha some rhetorical and important questions about man and life. Questions about man's longing for something great but life blocks his way and turns him weak. Questions about these great desires which turn to seem unimportant and silly with time. In such serious moment in which Vershinin offers fatal and rhetorical questions, there is an interruption by a sound of scrape of a mouse. Chekhov symbolically

invents such interruption from such tiny creature and charges with meanings that are full of tragic vision of reality.

The sound of mouse's scrape is a contrastive sound against man's desires and dreams. Man puts in his priority such things that he considers great and important as the three sisters see Moscow the most important thing that'll change their life, but by time they'll seem silly, trivial and tiny like the mouse. Vershinin expressed this idea already by referring to the prisoner, the cabinet minister, and again he expresses this saying: "All things that seem serious, important and full of meaning to us now, will be forgotten or anyway they won't seem important anymore." (i,pp.259-260). Chekhov implies this idea in this tragicomic scene and in many other tragicomic scenes.

In another conversation between Vershinin and Irina who is a hopeful character as it is clear by wearing white all the time, Chekhov exposes Irina's character well. She hopes that in future when she'll go to Moscow her life will change. She believes that She'll attain work and love instead of working in the mail post office. Chekhov, being young wants her character to represent the new generation. The hope of change and development is exemplified in her love of work as Chekhov believes in man's ability to change by work and education. She complains about her work in the post office because as she says" It's a sort of work you do without inspiration, without even thinking. (ii,p.278)

As Irina dreams of this moment, comically Vershinin picks a toy lying on the table, apetrushka with the cymbals and begins to make a noise with it repeatedly as a kind of ironic comment on Irina's words and dreams. She says "I dream of Moscow every night…We are going to Moscow in June. "There is the voice of the toy is heard." (ii,p.279) As if this ridiculous scene "is an ironic accompaniment to her words."[34] As life's refuses to grant Irina like her other sisters and brother what she likes and aspires to.

Actually, at the end of the play, she couldn't attain her dream of going to Moscow. Her dreams shattered as she lost her chance of salvation from her boring life in the provincial where she lives with her sisters. She lost the chance by the death of her Fiance, Toozenbach, a lieutenant, in a duel with Soliony, a captain who loves Irina too much that he can't bear the idea that another man will rival him in his love for her. For this reason, he killed Toozenbach.

Irina and Toozenbach dreamed together that they'll go to Moscow and work and become rich and happy there. Although he didn't work all his life but he believes in work as he says "I'm going to work, and in twenty-five or thirty years' time every man and woman will be working. Every one of us!" (i,p.253). So he and Irina are believers in work and future but unfortunately they won't realize this as their dreams crushed by his death. But for Irina, she'll go on though of his death and suffering she won't surrender. It is a comic scene at the first glance but actually it is tragic. Chekhov expresses such painful crushing of desires and dreams in a comic but pathetic way by the sound of the toy which is done by Vershinin. By these tragicomic scenes of conversations:

> Chekhov is establishing an important thematic conflict by creating a world where even unrelated conversations threaten the delicate construction of pipe dreams…It is an indication that the harshness of reality is a constant and bitter struggle for these characters. [35]

Thus, the previous tragicomic scenes of the conversations between Vershinin and Masha and between Vershinin and Irina intensify the disparity between reality and dreams. They denote a tragicomic vision of humanity in its struggle against the hostile forces of life. It is represented in this play by Solony who killed Irina's fiancé, in this way he crushed her happiness and Natasha, Andrey's wife. They are symbols of evil in the lives of the three sisters. She didn't only destroy Andrey's soul and turn him into a powerless character but also drifted his sisters out of their father's home without taking any action by Andrey against her. Finally, they became homeless.

The Three Sisters lost their brother, home and the dreams of going to Moscow but they didn't give up hope. As the poet Stanely Kunitz beautifully states that "the heart breaks and breaks/ and lives by breaking."[36] , thus the tragic and comic visions of life can't be separated. We are doomed by our failure but we keep pushing on as we never cease to hope. The play ends by a monologue of the three sisters, in which they agree that they live:

> [*The three sisters stand huddled together*]
> Masha: …we're left alone…to start our lives all over again. We must go on living…we must go on living….
> Irina [*puts her head on Olga's breast*].Some day people will know why such things happen, and what the purpose of all this suffering is…Then there won't be any more

> riddles…Meanwhile we must go on living…Yes, we must go on working!...
> Olga[*puts her arms around both her sisters*].How cheerfully and jauntily that band's playing-really I feel as if I wanted to live! Merciful God! The years will pass, and we shall all be forgotten and quite forgotten….But our sufferings may mean happiness for people who come after us… (iv,p.329)

Leaving the sisters as one cohesive unit, alive and still striving for the elusive happiness and fulfillment. Although, they lost their dreams and their home, but they must go on and must control their lives as such idea is vocalized in their last monologue.

In this way, Chekhov finished his play after combining the tragic and the comic in a close and authentic representation of life. Being a realist, he longs for the utmost truthfulness. This truthfulness lies in that "Hope springs eternal in the human breast."[37], it is one of life's mysteries. Though they never realized what they are longing for, but Chekhov wants to celebrate in this play man's resilience and his ability to bear the unbearable. As Olga declares that hopelessness is not the last word for Chekhov but hope and delusion keep us to the end. Chekhov delivers on Olga's tongue his belief that life is an important thing that one deserves to strive for regardless of disappointed hopes.

These were the main tragicomic scenes that Chekhov includes in his play the *Three Sisters*. It can be concluded from these scenes that the visions of happiness and tragedy are there in life. Life can't be completely miserable and tragic nor comic and cheerful. Chekhov tries to bring together the two realities in his plays. He is a ware that:

> the fragmented life that each of us lives is a tragicomedy. His plays suggest that human beings live in the midst of so many irreconcilable forces, both within and without, that the only way our lives can be given form in art is in the hybrid genre.[38]

Intermingling the two genres of comedy and tragedy, Chekhov portrays honestly the actual vision of life itself. So that his tragicomic vision can be described as a realistic and authentic vision of life, it lies between two extremes, the tragedy and comedy.

Notes

1. Robert W. Corrigan, *The World of the Theatre*, (USA: Scott Foresman and Company, 1979), p.140.

2. ibid, p.138.

3. Victor Emeljanow, *Anton Chekhov: The Critical Heritage*, (Cambridge: University Press,1913), p.117.

4. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman and William Burto, *Types of Drama: Plays and Essays*, (London: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989), p.77.

5. Milly S. Barranger, *Theatre: a Way of Seeing*, (USA: Thomson Learning Inc., 2006), p.108.

6. www.britannica.com , Tragicomedy, *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* 2009, May, 2009.

7. C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook To Literature*, (New York: The Odyssey Press: 1936), p.491.

8. www.britannica.com ,Tragicomedy, *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* 2009, May, 2009.

9. Barranger, p.108.

10. Corrigan, p.142.

11. www.britannica.com ,Tragicomedy, *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* 2009, May, 2009.

12. Quoted in Verna A. Foster, *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy*, (England: MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall, 2004), p.24.

13. ibid,14.

14. Corrigan, 140.

15. Christopher Wixon, www.pamphletpress.org, May 2009.

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20. E.V. Rieu, *Chekhov Plays*,(London: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1951).

21. David Magarshack, *Chekhov The Dramatist*, (New York: Hill & Wang , 1960), p.240.

22. Peter raven, 2009.

23. Magarshack, p.242.

24. ibid, p.243.

25. www.Jlcudd.com, Jeremy Cudd, *Writings on Dramatic Literature*/ Acting: Characters Contrast, 2009. Retrieved from the internet in October , 2009.

26. Nola Smith, Chekhov's Life and Dramatic Vision. ed. Bob Nelson, *Anton Chekhov's The Three Sisters*,(BYU Theatre and Film: 1995), p.1

27. Magarshack, p.245.
28. Robert Louis Jackson, *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. & Englewood Cliffs,1967), p.124.
29. Magarshack,p.246.
30. ibid,p.247.
31. Jackson, p.126
32. Magarshack, p. 254.
33. Jackson, p., 124.
34. ibid, p.125.
35. www.Jlcudd.com, Jeremy Cudd, *Writings on Dramatic literature*/ Acting: Characters Contrast, 2009. Retrieved from the internet in October , 2009.
36. www.pamphletpress.org, Christopher Wixon, Retrieved from the internet in April, 2009.
37. Corrigan, p.142.
38. ibid, p.14

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